Three Types of Kingship Explored in *Thyestes*

- *Tyrannus* – *quod nolunt velint*
- *Rex iustus* - *honesta*
- *Sapiens* – *mens bona*

**Fury & the Ghost of Tantalus**

- *tyrannus*

  The *domus* personified, by extension the dynasty. Fury's directives to Tantalus are an endorsement of the *tyrannus* kingship she envisions: vengeful, violent, bellicose, lustful, absent of *fas, fides, ius*, and unrestrained by *pudor* or *pietas*.

- The alternative to tyrannical rule is exile:

  [F] ... superbis fratribus regna excidant
  repetantque profugos ... (32-3)

  Let kingship slip from haughty brothers, and let it seek them again as exiles.

  [F] miser ex potente fiat, ex misero potens. (35)

  Let one become wretched instead of mighty, let one become mighty instead of wretched.

- Fury assumes the role of *tyrannus*. The Ghost of Tantalus is reluctant to infect the house:

  [GT] ... stabo et arcebo scelus.
  Quid ora terres verbere et tortos ferox
  minaris angues? quid famem infixam intimis
  agitas medullis? flagrat incensum siti
  cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat.
  sequor. (95-100)

  I shall stand and block the crime. Why do you terrify my face with your whip and fiercely threaten me with twisted snakes? Why do you incite the hunger fixed in my innermost marrows? My inflamed heart blazes with thirst and a flame darts in my burnt flesh. I follow.
Atreus & Satelles
	tyrannus v. rex iustus

Atreus:

- A tyrannus is powerful, responsive to threats, forceful, ruthless in vengeance, and absolute:

  [A] haec ipsa pollens incliti Pelopis domus
  ruat vel in me, dummodo in fratrem ruat. (190-1)

  This powerful house of renowned Pelops, let it fall even on me, as long as it falls
  on my brother.

- Fear and false praise are markers of power:

  [A] quod nolunt velint. (212)
  Let them want what they do not want.

- Values that bind his people – familia, pudor, cura iuris, sanctitas, pietas, fides – are
  immaterial to kings:

  [A] qua iuvat reges eant. (220)
  Let kings go to where it pleases.

- Kingship teaches cruelty, savagery, deceit, evil and crime:

  [A] Ut nemo doceat fraudis et sceleris vias,
  regnum docebit. ne mali fiant times?
  nascuntur … (312-4)

  Even if no one teaches them the ways of deceit and of crime, kingship will
  teach it. You fear lest they become evil? They are born thus.

- The alternative to power is exile:

  [A] per regna trepidus exul erravi mea … (237)
  Throughout my realm I have wandered, a fearful exile.

Satelles

- Advocates the importance of familia, honesta, pudor, cura iuris, sanctitas, pietas, and
  fides. These are markers of a rex iustus, by whose example the people may aspire:

  [S] rex velit honesta: nemo non eadem volet. (213)
  Let a king want honorable things: no one will not wish for the same.

- Rule is unstable for those kings not in possession of such things.
• The satellite’s arguments of a rex iustus are weakly presented. He begins with hesitant questions, centered on power-retention and popularity; he never touches upon the moral absolutes of good and evil. Volte-face and submission (accomplice?) to Atreus:

[S] Haud sum monendus: ista nostro in pectore
fides timorque, sed magis claudet fides. (334-5)

I do not need warning: loyalty and fear will conceal this in my heart, but loyalty more so.

Chorus & Thyestes
sapiens v. tyrannus

Chorus

• True kingship does not lie in citadels, wealth, Tyrian robes, crowns, or golden palaces. A king (sapiens) is free from fear, an evil heart, and ambition. He is not swayed by the fickle mob (vulgus), precious metals mined in the West, grain supplies from Libya, nor threats of war but:

[C] qui tuto positus loco
infra se videt omnia
ocurririque suo libens
fato nec queritur mori. (365-9)

He who, having been set in a place of safety, sees everything beneath himself and willingly goes to meet his fate, and does not complain about death.

[C] mens regnum bona possidet. (380)
A good mind takes possession of kingship.

• Those in power confront foreign peoples and lands (Dahae, Iberians, Sarmatians, the Danube River, the Seres, Parthians – geographical limits of Roman empire). This power is unstable. There is no distinction between tyrannus and rex iustus.

• The Chorus repudiates temporal power in exchange for retirement, and identifies with the sapiens:

[C] obscure positus loco
leni perfruar otio,
nullis nota Quiritibus
aetas per tacitum fluat.
sic cum transierint mei
nullo cum strepitu dies,
plebeius moriar senex.
illi mors gravis incubat
qui, notus nimis omnibus,
ignotus moritur sibi. (394-403)

Positioned in a secure place, let me enjoy gentle leisure; known to no Quirites, let my life flow through quiet. When my days shall have passed so
with no din, let me die an old plebeian man. Death lies heavily on one who, very well known to all, dies unknown to himself.

• Confidence in the Chorus’ philosophical tenet suffers from their lack of authority and dramatic distance from the action of the play.
  
  ([Act One] Following Fury’s frenzied directives to the Ghost of Tantalus, the Chorus enters praying for an end to the vicious cycle of crime. They are oblivious.
  
  (Act Two) After Atreus declares his despotic value system for kingship, the Chorus promotes the sapiens, but the description essentially illustrates Atreus’ attributes. Their depthless tenets fall flat, and suggest an ignorance of the true nature of power.
  
  (Act Three) They are excessively ready to believe the unbelievable. When Atreus receives Thyestes, they rejoice in Atreus’ pietas. (Act Four) After the messenger relates Atreus’ heinous slaughter to the Chorus, they do not make the connection between Atreus’ acts and the sun’s retreat. They embark on a philosophical and scientific inquiry, ultimately predicting the end of the world. The audience is very aware that it is not the end of the world. This results in a further diminishment of their authority.)

Thyestes

• Associates kingship with false luxuries (high-set, ornately decorated palaces inciting fear in the citizenry; fishing excursions; seaside palaces; banquets paid through tributes of many nations; worshipped to the exclusion of Jove; and baths) and fear (bodyguards guarding one’s sleep; always armed). Recalls the sentiments of the Chorus; frames his exile as the opposite of power:

  [Th] … dum excelsus steti,
  numquam pavere destiti atque ipsum mei
  ferrum timere lateris. o quantum bonum est
  obstare nulli, capere secures dapes
  humi iacentem! sceler a non intrant casas,
  tutusque mensa capitur angusta scyphus;
  venenum in auro bibitur … (447-53)

  While I stood exalted, I never ceased to fear and to fear the very sword at my side. Oh, what a good thing it is to obstruct no one, to take carefree meals lying on the ground! Crimes do not enter hovels, and a cup is taken safely at slight tables; poison is drunk in gold.

  [Th] immane regnum est posse sine regno pati. (470)

  To be able to endure without a kingdom is a vast kingdom.

• Ultimate power lies in one’s ability to die, kingship over self:

  [T] pater, potes regnare.
  [Th] Cum possim mori. (442-3)

  [T] Father, you are able to rule.
  [Th] Since I am able to die.

• Yet, Thyestes returns. The longed-for rooftops of the fatherland, wealth of Argos, sacred towers of the Cyclopes, racetracks, and the warm welcome of people are too great an enticement:
[Th] ego vos sequor, non duco. (489)

I follow you, I do not lead.

- Falls immediately into the role of supplicant upon meeting Atreus. He is reluctant to accept rich garments, the crown, and joint rule but is persuaded by Atreus in the end (quod nolunt velint). Demonstrates a lack of conviction, and his true desire for power reveals itself.

**Conclusion**

- Atreus assumes the role of priest in the slaughter of Thyestes’ children. He ignores the omens of the gods (the falling star, the weeping statues) and proceeds with his sacrifice to himself (713-14). Atreus usurps the role of god. The constellations fall, darkness abounds. Atreus assumes the role of the sun, to illuminate the crime to the father.

- Thyestes still fights the inner emotions of fear and grief while dining. He does not understand why his eyes uncontrollably weep, why his hair is unbound by flowers, why he groans, why his hands will not allow him to grasp his cup of wine, why the wine flies from his lips, and why the table from which he dines quakes.
  - *quod nolunt velint* – Thyestes’ inner conflict manifests itself physically.
  - Thyestes has lost the ability of self-determination (1046-7).
  - The gods provide no answer.

- Atreus, *tyrannus iratus*, wins the palm, but what is the nature of the victory?

**Bibliography**

APPENDIX I

Is this play about the politics of the imperial court? Scholarship is divided.

Fitch (2004: 224): “The story of Atreus and Thyestes had, in fact, long been found particularly relevant to Roman potentates and their boundless hunger for power. The notorious tag *oderrint dum metuant,* “let them hate as long as they fear me,” comes from Accius’ *Atreus* (perhaps 140 B.C.); it was quoted by Cicero to suggest Anthony’s tyrannical ambition, and by Seneca in reference to the age of Sulla and Marius; Caligula allegedly liked to utter it with perverse approval. The *Atreus of Aemilius Scaurus* so offended Tiberius that it cost him his life. Later in the century, Curatius Maternus planned a *Thyestes* specifically as a vehicle for dissident comment under the autocratic Domitian. If Seneca did indeed write *Thyestes* in the later years of Nero’s reign, he can have had little doubt about the dangerous relevance of its subject. *Fortem facit vicina libertas senem:* ‘The closeness of freedom makes the aged brave’ (*Pha.* 139).

Pratt (1983: 193): “There is a direct relationship between the moral significance of his drama *exempla* and the moral conditions of his time ... In these terms, the drama is deeply historical.”